

The fall and rise of Uda Punjab

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WIN: The Bombay High Court has overruled the Central Board of Film Certification and passed Uda Punjab with just one **SINGLE**  cut.



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By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Bollywood is in a bowl of broth. The Central Board of Film Certification under the stewardship of Pahlaj Nihalani, has been merrily playing scissors, scissors — and these cuts have often bled films out of form. The Board makes a mockery of its name. It does not certify, but censor. And although a panel, formed by the Government and headed by the 1970s arthouse veteran, Shyam Benegal, has said that the Board has no business to be censoring movies, Nihalani and his team have been doing precisely this.

The latest victim is Abhishek Chaubey's Uda Punjab, starring celebrity Hindi film stars like Shahid Kapoor, Kareena Kapoor and Alia Bhatt. The movie, which deals with the huge drug problem in Punjab, was first asked to go in for a whopping 89 cuts. Surely, Uda Punjab would have vanished into a mishmash of unrecognisable montage, and the film's angry producer, Anurag Kashyap (whose latest directorial, venture, Raman Raghav 2, premiered at the Cannes' Directors' Fortnight in May), said he felt that he was living in North Korea.

Later, the Board passed Uda Punjab with 13 cuts, and certified it for adults only or for those above 18 years of age.

This prompted the Uda Punjab producers to move the Bombay High Court, which overruled the Board's decision, and passed the work with just one single cut (as opposed to the 13 which the Board wanted, and as many as 89 initially) and an Adults Only certificate. "We do not find anything in the script of the movie that affects the sovereignty of the nation," the

Court observed. It noted that it was for filmmakers to choose the setting of their films as it was the underlying key to creative freedom. "The film was made for adults and that no one could dictate the filmmaker without abusing creative freedom."

In any case, I do not understand why the Board was making a hullabaloo over Punjab's drug menace. It is well known that substance abuse is a crippling evil in the State, which shares its border with Pakistan. Early this year after the attack on the Pathankot airbase in Punjab, it was suspected that a nexus between drug smugglers and terrorists might have facilitated the infiltration. As we all know, just about every addict tends to turn into a peddler with close links to the big guys. It was alleged that the intruders had taken the relatively easy drug route to enter the airbase.

A recent study by Delhi's All-India Institute of Medical Sciences has revealed that out of Punjab's total population of 28 million, as many as 123,000 men, women and teenagers have to have their daily fix of heroin. This means that the Punjab figure is four times the global average. Mind you, there are hundreds of thousands of people in the State who are addicted to not just heroin, but also other drugs. About 240,00 people depend on opioid, and 860,000 are actual users.

In such a context, Udda Punjab is merely fictionalising a fact, and the film may, for all you know, help people see what is happening to their once prosperous State. But herein lies the problem. With Punjab going in for the Assembly elections in early 2017, the ruling Shiromani Akali Dal, which is allied with the Bharatiya Janata Party (holding power in New Delhi), would not want to be seen as having turned a blind eye to the severe drug addiction sweeping the State.

So, Udda Punjab is inconvenient, and terribly so. Therefore, maul it into a mess, and, in fact, the Board had wanted all references to Punjab deleted, even in the title!

Udda Punjab opens in theatres on June 17.

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Iraivi director faces producers' ire

Tamil movie men are overly sensitive, and find even a trace of criticism of their works or similarity of film characters to themselves intolerable. Which is sad, given the universal fact that art, however brilliant, will invariably attract the most diverse of opinions. War-time Casablanca was ripped apart by critics, but the movie went on to become a great all-time classic. Satyajit Ray's Pather Panchali was ignored in his native Bengal, which woke up and celebrated the masterpiece after it won accolade at Cannes in 1956.

Karthik Subbaraj (of Pizza and Jigarhanda fame) — whose latest Tamil work, Iraivi, hit the screens recently — is now embroiled in a controversy. One of the characters in the film, a movie producer, is portrayed as a heartless villain whose refusal to release a picture drives its director, Arul (played by SJ Surya), to drink and destruction.

Even though one is familiar with such stories of inhumanity — not just in the cinema fraternity but also in other trades and professions — the Tamil Nadu Film Producers Council is peeved over the brutal way Subbaraj depicted the producer in Iraivi. An absolutely gory scene where the man is bludgeoned to death by Michael (Vijay Sethupathi) — a close pal of Arul — is being viewed by the Council as a reflection of Subbaraj's anger against the Jigarhanda producer, Kathiresan. The two had apparently fallen out.

The Vice-President of the Council, Thenappan, said that Subbaraj had changed the original story as he was shooting Iraivi. "What Subbaraj said initially and what has finally emerged are two different things. He even hesitated to show the progress of the post-production work to his producer."

Even one of Iraivi's presenters, producer K E Gnanavelraja, appears upset with Subbaraj. In a sensational Whatsapp audio, Gnanavelraja said: "Unlike others, Karthik Subbaraj doesn't know the pain of becoming a director as he never worked as an assistant to anyone... Now with Iraivi, the director has not only overshot the budget, but also put the producer (C V Kumar) in an insecure state."

Subbaraj promised to complete Iraivi in Rs7 crores, but he over spent, taking the cost to Rs13.5 crores, including print and publicity. Kumar had to release the movie on a deficit, and while Iraivi has seemingly done well in urban multiplexes, it has fared poorly in B and C centres.

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